

John Hill

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE IMPRISONED WRITER

COMMEMORATIVE EVENT

WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2006

STATE LIBRARY LAWN – 12.00 MIDDAY

In 1995, 11 years ago, a gentle frail white haired old man came to Adelaide to tell his story. He was the poet Nguyen Chi Thien and he had just been released from 27 years imprisonment in Vietnam. His crime was to write poems about what he saw and what he knew of life in his native country.

In a quiet shaking voice he read of his ordeal where even in prison he continued to write:

“If Heaven does exist, if tomorrow is still to come
I’ll tell the story of my own night, dark and long,
So that my contemporaries and future generations
May wake up and realise my dreadful tribulations.”

Nearer to home and closer in time, an anonymous detainee wrote the following poem as a cry of despair that no one is listening.

"Make a whistle from my throat

I do not know
what will happen after I die.
I do not want to know.
But I would like the Potter to make a whistle
from the clay of my throat.
May this whistle fall into the hands
of a cheeky and naughty child
and the child to blow hard on the whistle continuously
with the suppressed and silent air of his lungs
and disrupt the sleep
of those who seem dead
to my cries."

Today on the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer the International organisation PEN is making sure that people are listening.

Last year the Sydney chapter of PEN released *Another Country-Writers in Detention* and launched it here in South Australia at the Baxter Detention Centre.

This book has given voice to members of our community that we do not usually hear, the voices of detainees, refugees and former asylum seekers.

But these people are also journalists, playwrights, fiction writers, poets, & cartoonists and members of our writing community who are suffering from a lack of freedom.

Distinguished Australian writer and PEN Member, David Malouf says of this book:

'Listening to these voices is like looking into a mirror. They come not from strangers but from men and women who are already fellow citizens, close and clearly recognisable, of the same world we live in.'

PEN works across the world fighting for the rights of imprisoned and oppressed writers and it is comforting to know that we now have a chapter in Adelaide, which has successfully organised this event, and who can continue the excellent work of their Sydney and Melbourne based colleagues.

I understand that next year the Adelaide Fringe has invited the Adelaide chapter of PEN to organise a three-night reading and discussion event, talking about writers being imprisoned and persecuted.

Here again PEN is making sure that the voices of imprisoned writers are being heard in all parts of the community – I congratulate the Fringe on making such an opportunity available.

As we have heard today it is ten years since the death of Nigerian writer Ken Saro Wiwa – a man who used his voice to fight against oppression and ultimately lost that voice and his life for what he believed in.

On this day we remember those whose voices we can no longer hear:

Guy-Andre Keiffer – an independent French Canadian journalist who ‘disappeared’ on the Ivory Coast in July 2004;

Prahad Goala – an Indian journalist murdered in January 2006;

Maksim Maksimov – an investigative reporter with the St Petersburg weekly magazine, Goro, who hasn’t been seen since June 2004; and the recent murder of leading Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

These voices have all been silenced but by the work of PEN, including our new Adelaide Chapter, we can all make sure that they have not been forgotten.

Thank you.